

God's Purposes for Relational Distance: A Means to a Good End



by LAURA ANDREWS

We all yearn for good relationships. We talk, sing, and write about them. But not all relationships are good. Intimacy and vulnerability open us to all manner of possible injuries. The people closest to us are often the ones who hurt us the most, and the relationships in which we expect to feel the safest and most significant are the ones where we receive our deepest wounds.

So how are we supposed to respond to this pain? The world around us often offers a simplistic solution for these relationships: end them! Or at least make it impossible for the injuring person to ever hurt you again. However, as Christians, we know that discarding relationships or permanently shutting out others usually doesn't square with God's invitation to imitate him as the One who pursues his enemies and suffers for the sake of restoring relationship with them. Not only that, we believe that he is at work in restoring our broken relationships with each other and we are called to actively participate in this process.

These convictions are often very hard to work out in practice. In fact, our attempts to continue to pursue intimacy and practice vulnerability in these difficult relationships can lead to surprising new depths of pain and discouragement. What should we do in these situations? Continuing to pursue closeness appears unwise, but allowing or creating distance

Laura Andrews (MDiv) serves on the faculty and counsels at CCEF.

between us and the other person seems ungodly.¹ These moments of feeling caught between our convictions and our pain are a good place to pause and consider: Are we uncomfortable choosing relational distance because we assume God's eagerness to restore broken relationships makes *him* intolerant of distance? Are we simply to mirror his disposition? Or are we misunderstanding God in this?

It is interesting to notice that God appears willing to permit or even enforce relational distance in Scripture. We only have to get a few chapters in to observe this. In chapter 3 of Genesis, God permitted Adam and Eve to choose distance in their relationship with him by allowing them to distrust him and act in defiance of his leadership. As a consequence, God imposed distance in their relationship.

The LORD God sent [them] out from the garden of Eden...He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword...to guard the way to the tree of life. (v.23–24)

In this, it may appear that God has given up on his people, but we know the full story. Through Abraham, Moses, and finally, in Christ, he restores his relationship—and thereby closeness—with his people.² In retrospect, we can see that God is not averse to using relational distance as a part of his reconciliation plan.

This is a surprising observation. God not only tolerates relational distance but intentionally employs it at times for the sake of real intimacy.³ It makes sense, therefore, that with his help we can use it as a

1. Distance could include reducing the frequency and duration of interactions, and limiting how much we rely upon, share with them, or invest in the relationship.

2. Even in Christ's finished work there is some dissonance and mystery: we are presently united with Christ and indwelt by his Spirit, and yet we await his return when we will be with him face-to-face (1 Corinthians 13:12; 1 John 3:2).

3. A note about language: It is difficult to communicate about this topic because, in our culture, the language surrounding it is either limited or loaded. For example, most people associate this topic with the category of *boundaries*. While some have found this category helpful, others don't know how to reconcile their interpretation of this concept with Scripture's main themes, or they have seen it used to justify selfishness. I believe that *all* language used to highlight the dynamics of relational closeness and distance—words like intimacy, trust, vulnerability, connection, separation, boundaries, space, guardedness, or common secular categories like enmeshment or disengagement—carry some ambiguity and cause confusion. My priority is to build a biblical framework that grounds

way to work through relational strife with one another. This is especially comforting for those of us who feel over-responsible for the health of our relationships and suffer guilt and intense pressure to fix them when distance occurs. I have great empathy for these “over-responsible” individuals and have chosen to make their struggles the focus of this article. However, the principles developed here can be applied to anyone wanting to grow in wisdom about how distance can be employed for the sake of strengthening relational intimacy.⁴

Are we uncomfortable choosing relational distance because we assume God's eagerness to restore broken relationships makes *him* intolerant of distance?

To this end, we will start with considering some of the common ways pain and the ensuing pressure to distance surfaces in our relationships. We will then discern how God's design of intimacy necessitates the distance he employs in the broken relationship with his people and examine how this translates to our relationships with each other. Last, we will discuss how to utilize relational distance as an opportunity to draw near to God, strengthen our faith in his care for our relationships, and consider how we are to wisely move

toward others in love *even* when distance remains. Clearly, we cannot do this on our own. Such growth can only be empowered by the work of the Spirit in our hearts, cultivating both a desire for God and godliness as well as the holiness required to rightly engage with him and his world. I am thankful for this beautiful truth.

With that introduction, let's move forward. If you want to use this time to think through a particular relationship, have paper and pen with you to work through the process and gain insight as you respond to the questions posed.

our understanding and practice, one that will give us flexibility in using a diversity of language and metaphors, while remembering that they are limited. These metaphors need to be contextualized and applied carefully.

4. For a fuller description of over-responsible behavior and problematic ways of relating to God and others, see Laura Andrews, “Be Like Martha? God's Invitation to Over-Responsible People,” *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 33:3 (2019): 58–78.

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The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

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